Chapter Six

चोरी — CHORYA — THEFT

The Vyasan That Is Also a Vow

Of the seven vyasans, चोरी stands alone in one respect worth noticing before anything else is said about it. Gambling, meat-eating, drink, illicit sex-for-hire, hunting, and adultery are all, in the formal architecture of Jain lay ethics, extra restraints — habits a householder is urged to avoid but which sit outside the five foundational anuvratas, the "small vows" that structure the whole of lay practice. Theft does not sit outside that structure. It sits inside it, at the very centre, as अस्तेय (asteya) or अचौर्य (achaurya) — non-stealing — the third of the five great vows (mahavratas) for the monk and the third of the five small vows (anuvratas) for the householder, ranked immediately after non-violence and truthfulness and immediately before chastity and non-attachment. Chorya is unique among the seven vyasans in having two addresses in the tradition's map of the moral life: one as a formal vow every Jain, monk or lay, is expected to keep, and a second, narrower one as a vyasan — a habitual, appetite-driven disposition toward taking what is not given, distinct from an isolated lapse. This chapter is about both addresses, and about why the distinction between them turns out to matter.

The definition given for the vow itself, in Acharya Amritachandra's tenth-century manual of conduct, the Purushartha-siddhyupaya, is unusually precise for a text of this genre: adattadana, "the taking of what has not been given." Amritachandra does not stop at defining the act — he immediately supplies the reasoning behind why it belongs beside non-violence rather than in a category of its own. "Driven by passions," he writes, "taking anything that has not been given may be termed theft, and since theft causes injury, it is himsa." That single sentence collapses the modern distinction between "crimes against property" and "crimes against persons" that most legal systems maintain: for the Jain tradition, there is no such distinction, because there is no theft that does not injure someone — the owner's sense of security, the community's fabric of trust, or, in the subtlest reading, the thief's own capacity for honest self-perception. And the scope the vow claims is genuinely total: it covers not merely valuable property but "anything even if unattended or unclaimed, whether it is of worth or a worthless thing," and it operates across body, speech, and mind alike — a monk transgresses the mahavrata

not only by taking something himself but by encouraging another to take it, or by silently approving once it is taken. For the householder, the anuvrata version scales this down to what a life embedded in commerce and family obligation can actually sustain — a householder cannot, realistically, achieve the monk's absolute standard — but the underlying architecture, injury through appropriation, does not change.

Where the Vow Ends and the Vyasan Begins

If asteya is the boundary — the line a householder commits not to cross — chorya as vyasan is something else: a description of what happens to a mind that keeps testing that boundary, that treats the vow as an obstacle to be managed rather than a line to be respected. The classical descriptions of the vyasan reach well past the pickpocket and the burglar to include what a modern reader would recognise as white-collar and structural dishonesty — profiteering through deception, adulteration of goods, bribery, the falsification of weights and measures, tax evasion, the quiet overuse of shared or common resources beyond one's due share. What unites the alley thief and the merchant who weighs his scale unfairly is not the size of the theft but the shape of the disposition behind it: a habituated willingness to treat "what is not given" as fair game whenever the odds of being caught look favourable. This is precisely why chorya earns a second, separate entry on the vyasan list even though asteya already exists as a formal vow — the tradition is distinguishing between a rule and a character trait, between an act one might commit once, in a moment of desperation, and an orientation of the will that keeps seeking occasions to commit it again.

What a Torn Parking Ticket Reveals

Modern behavioural economics arrived at essentially the same distinction, from an entirely different direction, through one of the more elegant natural experiments in the field's history. Between 1997 and 2002, the economists Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel tracked the parking violations of United Nations diplomats in New York City during a period when diplomatic immunity meant those tickets carried no legal or financial consequence whatsoever — a rare real-world setting in which the deterrent effect of punishment could be entirely removed from the equation, leaving only whatever internal restraint diplomats brought with them from home. The finding, published in the Journal of Political Economy in 2007, was stark: diplomats from countries that scored poorly on existing corruption indices accumulated dramatically more unpaid violations than diplomats from low-corruption countries, and this gap persisted for years, unaffected by the individual diplomat's income, rank, or length of posting. Where enforcement

was absent, what remained was norm — an internalised sense, carried across a border, of how much taking-what-is-not-yours a person's culture had trained them to consider acceptable. Fisman and Miguel had, without using the word, produced hard quantitative evidence for exactly the distinction the Jain tradition draws between a vow enforced by fear of consequence and a disposition that holds even when no one is watching — which is, after all, the only kind of restraint the tradition considers to have any real moral weight.

The Wallet That Proves the Opposite of What You'd Expect

A second and, on first encounter, far more surprising study reaches toward the same territory from the psychology of the individual rather than the sociology of nations. In 2019, a team led by Alain Cohn and Michel André Maréchal published in Science the largest field experiment on honesty ever conducted: over seventeen thousand "lost" wallets — clear plastic cases containing a visible amount of money and, crucially, contact information for a fictitious owner — were turned in at banks, hotels, police stations, and other public institutions across 355 cities in 40 countries, and the researchers simply recorded how many were reported. The design let them test something no amount of survey data could establish: whether raising the financial stakes of a theft makes people more or less likely to commit it. Naive economic reasoning says more money should mean less honesty — the temptation is larger, so more people should give in. The finding ran in precisely the opposite direction. Wallets containing a substantial sum of money (about $94 in the study's benchmark currency) were reported at a rate of 72 percent; wallets with a smaller sum ($13) at 51 percent; wallets with no money at all, only 40 percent — in 38 of the 40 countries studied. Cohn and Maréchal's own explanation is the one that matters here: what rises along with the money is not the temptation but the psychological cost of thinking of oneself as a thief. A small, ambiguous sum can be pocketed under a comforting story — finder's keepers, no real harm done, hardly theft at all. A large, unambiguous sum removes the comforting story; keeping it can no longer be narrated as anything other than what it is, and it is precisely at that point, the data show, that most people's honesty holds firm.

That finding is, in effect, an experimental demonstration of viveka doing its work — or failing to. The wallets with small, ambiguous sums are exactly the conditions under which chitta-vibhrama, the clouding the Jain commentators describe, has room to operate: enough uncertainty about what the act really is for the mind to tell itself a story other than the true one. The wallets with large, unambiguous sums strip that room away, and clarity — forced, in this case, by the sheer size of the number — does the moral work that willpower alone often cannot. Self-concept, not self-control, turns out to be the load-

bearing wall; the Jain tradition, calling the target faculty viveka rather than "self-concept," was pointing at the same structure a thousand years before a psychology laboratory could isolate it with a plastic wallet and a research budget.

The World's Ledger

Scale the individual finding up to the level of nations and nothing about the picture softens. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2025, released in February 2026 and covering 182 countries and territories, put the global average score at 42 out of 100 — a new low for the index — with more than two-thirds of all countries scoring below the 50-point midpoint that separates "relatively clean" from "seriously corrupt" on the index's own scale. Only 31 countries have meaningfully improved their score since 2012; the rest, in the organisation's own words, "have stayed stagnant or got worse." The International Monetary Fund's Fiscal Affairs Department, in its 2019 accounting exercise led by Paolo Mauro, put a number on what that stagnation costs: public-sector corruption costs the world an estimated $1.5 to $2 trillion annually in bribes alone, and curbing corruption to the level already achieved by the least corrupt quartile of countries would free up roughly $1 trillion a year in additional tax revenue globally — revenue that, in low-income countries specifically, would be equivalent to about 4 percent of GDP, enough, the IMF notes, to fund meaningful expansion of health and education spending in exactly the places that need it most. None of this counts the theft that never reaches a corruption index at all — the everyday adulteration, short-weighing, and petty appropriation the classical vyasan literature spends most of its attention on — because no global institution audits a vegetable seller's scale. The visible, trillion-dollar tip very likely sits on a far larger submerged mass of exactly the small-scale chorya the Acharyas were most concerned with in the first place.

What the Two Addresses Got Right

Set side by side, the vow and the vyasan turn out to have been doing two distinct and complementary jobs that modern research keeps independently rediscovering it needs. Asteya, the boundary-vow, targets the line itself — and Fisman and Miguel's diplomats show that a line held only by external enforcement collapses the moment enforcement disappears, which is exactly why the tradition insists the vow must be internalised as norm, not merely obeyed as law. Chorya, the vyasan, targets the disposition that keeps testing the line — and Cohn and Maréchal's wallets show that the thing standing between a person and that disposition, more than fear of punishment, is the strength and clarity of their own self-concept, which is precisely the faculty

(viveka) the vyasan literature says theft erodes fastest in those who practise it. And the Corruption Perceptions Index and the IMF's trillion-dollar accounting show what happens at civilisational scale when both of those internal safeguards — norm and self-concept — are allowed to erode across enough people for long enough: not an occasional scandal, but a permanent, compounding tax on every economy that fails to protect them. A tenth-century text that filed "taking what is not given" under the same heading as violence, and then built a second, separate warning about the habit of mind that leads there, was not being needlessly elaborate. It had already mapped the two failure points a wallet-drop experiment and a diplomat's parking record would take a thousand years, and a research budget, to rediscover.

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